

# Reflections on the Popular/High Art Continuum : Seven small essays, ventures, somewhat in the original French sense of the word *essai*

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## Essay 1 — On Making Things Happen

W. H. Auden: “poetry makes nothing happen”<sup>(1)</sup>—by poetry, let us say he meant high art. High art makes nothing happen.

Making nothing happen. Surely it is harder than it sounds, even for a moment, to make *nothing* happen. To defer anything at all happening. Because things are going to happen.

But then, deferral makes the human happen—the human, that guardian, that font, that sanctuary for the nothingness of the universe. Deferral makes the human happen, the Sartrean *néant* of consciousness, call it—the human makes culture, that collective making of nothing, happen. And “Nothing will come of nothing,” quoth the soon-to-be mad king. Just ask the creditors of bankrupt Detroit, who wanted its art collection sold off and have yet to see a dime on their lost dollars.<sup>(2)</sup> And once that culture-nothing has happened, the nothing which Generative Anthropology defines as the opposite of the something of violence—once *that* nothing has happened, other things may begin to happen, but only things laced with nothingness, significant things, things only half things, half thing and half-sign, half made and half potentially made, half something and half nothing.

“Here,” said the president, the maker, proximate maker anyway, of the most cataclysmic something his nation has ever experienced, the violence that will soon sweep him too away as it has so many others; “here,” said he, “is the little lady who made the big war.” “But I have had a vision,” replied Harriet Beecher Stowe—or at

any rate, should have, or would have replied(3)—“I have had a vision of what art can do.” Popular art, that is, that she and her president agreed did, does, *can* make something happen—*that* something to which we have alluded, violence—and will make it happen again. As with many visions, this was probably both right and wrong.

Maybe *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* didn’t start the American Civil War or even help to. Maybe novels make nothing happen, too—hard to know how one could prove it one way or another. But some people at the time and more people now seem to find it plausible, presumably on the analogy of what they themselves feel when reading the book or, more likely, what they feel other people likely feel or felt. The kinds of feelings that might make other people start wars, and so on, whether or not they actually do. So, we’ll venture that novels, or popular art anyway, make at least the *feeling* of something happening happen. Whereas, then, might we say that high art makes the feeling of nothing happening happen? Certainly, many undergraduates would endorse the latter formulation. *Waiting for Godot* famously made nothing happen, twice. So it must have seemed to those first audiences who naively entered the playhouse expecting something ... else. This, the disabused undergraduates could have told them, is what high art *always* does, not just twice but over and over and over!

At any rate, let us assert this much, upon the authority of the artists and at least some of their audience:

High art makes the feeling (at least) of nothing happening happen.

Popular art makes the feeling (at least) of something happening happen.

Pregnant derivation: The high and popular art distinction, as a distinction, is located in feelings experienced.

## **Essay 2 — On Askesis, Wisdom, and Plenitude**

A brief review of the concept of the aesthetic in Generative Anthropology.

Eric Gans, *Originary Esthetics (Originary Thinking, 1993)*:

Oscillation between imaginary possession and recognised inviolability is characteristic of all aesthetic experience. (118)

The aesthetic is “an effect rather than a solid state” (123) and its “minimal

locus" is "the individual's own scene of representation" where it "offers an internal solution to resentment," or indeed, "permits an unresentful vision of the centre" (125).

"The opposition between the high and popular aesthetic modes, or 'art' and 'entertainment,' reflects a tension internal to the originary scene which emerges only in the Romantic era. In the context of the contemplation of the central object of the scene, the moment of art looks back to the renunciation of appetite implicit in the sign, whereas that of entertainment looks forward to the appetitive satisfaction of the communal feast that will follow" (171).

"'Popular' and 'high' are poles rather than mutually exclusive categories" (172).

Popular art "denies the askesis of the sign by anticipating the alimentary satisfaction that follows its emission in the originary event. The anticipation of my individual portion is founded on my renunciation of the whole" (173).

And, from *Chronicle* 315:

Popular culture, whether it be pre-industrial folk culture or the mass-produced culture of industrial societies, is entertainment for those who . . . adopt, whether for a moment or a lifetime, an attitude of indifference to the functioning of society as a whole.<sup>(4)</sup> Renunciation of the whole, however, is clearly at least a degree of *askesis*, and indifference to social functioning often enough a form of prudence. Taken together, indeed, might not such an attitude even be wise? Healthy? One cannot have it all. To try to have it all is finally to have nothing. And even if one senses, dimly or acutely as the case may be, its contagious character, nonetheless, to live happily or well is to come to some sort of accommodation with desire. To be peaceful is to be happy with one's piece, of the collective human pie, to imagine oneself the equal of the great people in the world, to be unwilling to change one's place with kings because of the beauty of one's car or house, haircut or attitude.

Popular art models such accommodations. Much of it is suffused with a feeling not of fragments or limits but of glorious plenitude, from the endless un-spooling of Scheherazade's narratives of sex, violence, riches and mysterious transformation, to Michael Bubl  's exuberant promise that "the best is yet to come."<sup>(5)</sup> If this reflects originary resentment, everyday resentment in the more familiar sense of the term is often distant.

High art conveys an aching sense of the inaccessibility, even the emptiness of the centre; pop art, the fun, the fullness, the richness of the periphery. It may be only a part, but, often enough and as long as it lasts, it *feels* like everything. Or enough.

Also from *Chronicle* 315: “The popular subject seeks imaginary satisfactions in compensation for his worldly frustrations, but since his ‘oppressor’ is real whereas the fulfilment of desire is not, the heart of popular culture is revenge on the former rather than celebration of the latter.”

The private fulfilment of desires and the resultant public good together constitute, of course, the beating “heart” of the market, and much popular art joyfully reflects the productive exuberance of the market system. Are not all human satisfactions half-fantasy, the realization of mediated desires, imagined even as enjoyed? Do we not eat or play or drive our car or make love in an aesthetic mode? Is this not “real”? Such satisfactions combine, certainly, with a sceptical watchfulness, a reflexive resentment of claims to inequality which—while unpleasant enough in some of its manifestations—might in turn be considered an important safeguard of democratic market systems. Even a prerequisite thereof.

Popular art may be “parasitic” on high culture (*Originary Thinking* 174), but only in the sense that all market activity, economic or otherwise, is parasitic on a public centre, the askesis it demands, the peace, order, and good government it maintains.

### **Essay 3. On the Continuum of Attitudes and the Imbrication of Experiences**

Let us muse on the phrase, “for a moment or a lifetime,” from the quotations above. Consumers of pop “adopt, whether for a moment or a lifetime, an attitude of indifference to the functioning of society as a whole.” One may wonder how common it is for modern denizens of the market to retain such an attitude lifelong, hegemonically, uninterruptedly. To imagine such consistency is to imagine lives into which no glimpse of the transcendent ever pierces, not even a transitory apprehension of what those around them, from varying positions and with varying degrees of naivety or sophistication, revere as “higher things” or the beauty, in any of its many forms, of self-sacrifice. It is to imagine those never stirred by represented heroism except as they imagine themselves performing it, or as they resent its purchase on their own desires. But let us concede the possibility. Still, for the purposes of the current essay, we will concern ourselves with the many others, those who experience movement from one attitude to another.

Attitudes towards “the functioning of society” we must call ethical, and if the same people move in and out of them we may as well call them *ethical moods*. Such moods alter, sometimes, for example, in response to the proximity or distance of objects of temptation. These distances, or the difficulties that intervene between

the images provoked by art and their imagined appropriation, we may well say are under the control of the artist, and inhere as formal properties of the art-work. But this formulation does not recognise the active aspect of the human experience of art, the moods or contexts of desire which drive people to expose themselves to one or other attitude-adjusting art-experience. A person may say, today I will defer, I will have no Rachmaninoff today, I will have Stockhausen; I will shun Phillip Glass in favour of Steve Reich. I will have John Cage sitting for 4 minutes and 33 seconds in front of a piano. Of course, the artists may sometimes ambush us, all or partly unawares. Perhaps we thought John Cage was going to *play* that piano, that he was going to play a bagatelle, or some Chopin.

Or, on another day, I may adopt a mixed or intermediate attitude. I may tune my brow to the middle. I may tinker with, or play host to artworks which tinker with the interval of deferral. I may ask to be surprised, for suspense, as to the interval or eventual outcome—immediate gratification or endless deferral. (Even if, in another, temporarily quiescent area of my mind, I know quite well that no deferral is ever truly endless and every gratification must pass at least fleetingly through form.) I may be lazy, or alertly attentive, attend a little or a lot to the means, indeed the forms, by which my desire is awakened, deferred, gratified.

Ethical moods are a luxuriance of the market, presumably not available on the originary scene, which required everyone who was part of that scene to be in the same mood. They are thus less available in ritual cultures, or in moments of reversion thereto, as in the passions of a mob. Consumerism, for all its hailing, for all its manipulations, its relentlessness, for all its wafting of background muzak, has notably less control over our ethical moods, and the influence it does have is liable to denunciation. It insinuates, true, its effects accumulate, and while it is entirely possible to turn a cold shoulder to any one of its blandishments it is certainly difficult to snub them all—doubtless the row of pure asceticism is harder now to hoe than once it was. On some days, too, it is harder to resist than on others—the tides and gulf-streams, currents, eddies and mere dimples animating the ocean of global desire across which we tack are as changeable in force as in bearing.

But considerable variations are possible in the way of responses, just as considerably different experiences along the hi-pop continuum are possible, for different people, for the same people on different days, in different moments of one day, in different epochs of individual lives, or the histories of cultures. Every single oscillation—are we not forced to concede?—in all the myriad of them since the originary scene, is, has been and will be temporally asymmetrical, to one side or the other, to a slightly different degree than any of the rest. To say the aesthetic experience is individual is in effect to concede this. The sign is collective, attention is joint, but the virtual movement back and forth from contemplated sign to

imagined consummation must occur in an interior solitude whose experienced temporality need not be synchronous with the unanimous exterior movement from deferral to *sparagmos* which that inner movement anticipates and recapitulates.

If aesthetic experiences are temporally asymmetrical, they are obviously also affectively so. There are weightings, preserved by that great enabler of the human, memory, and not apparently or always dependent upon the relative intervals of oscillation. One instant of glorious formal significance, one piercing recognition of the beauty of the object of desire, may outweigh in memory a long saturnalia of imagined consumption, haunting the post-prandial, the post-coital vacancy with the squandered promise of lost deferrals. Maybe we also feel beat the “heart” of pop in this very experience of loss or chagrin, that tells of pop’s wasteful economy of desire, the glorious potentialities too soon gone into the ever-devouring maw of consummation. Different responses to this experience are also possible, of course, by different persons or by persons at different times, from the frenzied return to the original source of stimulation, seeking an ever stronger dose of the same sparagmatic drug, to the gradual or sudden disenchantment with the pop process itself, and thus the launching into a paradoxical quest for *more of less*, for a longer moment of deferral and beauty, and for the art-forms that provide it. Many an experience of high art has been bounced to from the springboard of pop.

Perhaps the metaphor of the continuum even obscures an important truth, namely that all pop harbours within itself the high seeds of its own transcendence or destruction, moves through temporal phases unpredictably but inevitably intersected by vertical intimations of the timeless.

## **Essay 4 - On Qualitative Judgement in the Aesthetics of Resentment**

Flattery is subject to aesthetic judgement. Flattery is to different degrees resistible, but if artful, can be glimpsed and admired in its formal beauty even as it works—even as this glimpse allows it to work—its nefarious purposes upon our desires. Flattery, in such circumstances, will get you everywhere. But, flattery may also be potent when naive, sincerest in its helpless mimeticism, beautiful in its evident absence of design. Flattery has its naive and sentimental phases.

And what is true generally of flattery is true even more of the flattery of resentment.

“And you think I didn’t have my suffering—look here, when I went to give up that flat and saw that damn box of dog biscuits sitting there on that sideboard, I sat down and cried like a baby. By God, it was awful—.”I couldn’t forgive him, or like

him. But I saw that what he had done was, to him, entirely justified. It was all very careless and confused. They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things or creatures and then retreated back to their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made. . . .

I shook hands with him; it seemed silly not to, for I felt suddenly as though I were talking to a child. Then he went into the jewelry store to buy a pearl necklace—or perhaps only a pair of cuff buttons—rid of my provincial squeamishness forever. In combination with the rest of the concluding pages of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby*, this celebrated passage is surely one of the more eloquent expressions of resentment in literature. It is tone-perfect, like a beautifully prepared operatic high C. It prevents us from feeling small in our resentments, it flatters us that our resentments are big, generous even, and wearily far-seeing, of a piece with our complicated feeling of superiority and pitying awe at the martyred Gatsby himself. *Those god damn careless rich people*. Oh yes, we eat cake and have it too—"fending off" and wallowing in "romantic subjectivism" at the same moment<sup>(6)</sup>—a combination very much consonant with the account of aesthetic experience we are referencing in these essays.

The double perspective, the distance, established by the distinction between the narrator and protagonist in this and many another novel seems the hi-art move par excellence, complicating identification, qualifying desire, examining and evaluating its objects. But such ostensibly unresentful visions of the centre are not truly cathartic here—they are but the trappings of tragedy, dressing up our desires. When poor hopeful Gatsby stops giving parties, thinking he has Daisy back forever, instead of for a few illicit afternoons of her self-indulgence, we supposedly have our askesis, we too can feel what grotesque things roses are. But this is not really tragic knowledge. It just helps ready us, sets us free to soar with that high C.

But nor is the treatment of Gatsby's desire ironic. This is doubtless what makes this novel so successful: it was written, evidently enough, by a romantic, by a self-acknowledging and thus superior "provincial." Its resentments defend earnestness. The usurpation of centrality it decries is that perpetrated by the crass new forces of market success—a venerably Romantic posture—but the martyrdom it models is not of the man left behind by or trampled by the market. Gatsby rises in Eastern seaboard world, triumphs in its modes of desire—nearly a century later we are still agog at (cinematic stagings of) those parties—and he is only finally destroyed for failing to respect the infinite fungibility of its objects of desire, which is to say, for trying to turn it to fixed, sacral purposes. (Failing heroically to see how eminently replaceable his Daisy really is—has the man never heard of *serial* monogamy!) His story is thus of special comfort to those committed to similar projects, or (a

somewhat larger group) able to imagine themselves being so. Appropriately themed resentments are summoned. Such projects, it is hopefully not too churlish to remind ourselves, are of course still strategies in the market, aspiring, in putative defeat as effectively as in glorious triumph, to centrality, identity, the attention and desires of others.

But does it make our *something* happen, *The Great Gatsby*? Violence? Surely it contributes class and style to our resentments, makes such resentments harder to dismiss, helps foster attitudes which do have their political expressions. *That god damn one percent*. Gatsby may be no Uncle Tom, no Eliza. But to such resentments, in their collective power, the political process will have to respond. Where it doesn't, there *will* be ... something.

Like all beautiful things, however, even truly artful flattery finally leaves more of nothing than of something. Indeed, any awareness of the qualitative intimates the stasis of attention to form. Can this mean that the more successfully resentment is gratified, the more it is transcended? Can this mean, the more completely the consummation can be pre-figured in the art work, the more that anticipated peace can pervade the aesthetic experience itself, deferring its own completion, creating a peace before peace? Is high now just pop done better, by pop's own measure?

## Essay 5 — On Irony and Doubling

High and Pop shadow, double each other.

Every "realist" narrative, for example, is shadowed by its "romantic" original: *how other people want things to be* is the subtext, the inverse double, the essential negative measure of how things putatively *are*. The resentful desire of realism is for the chastisement, the overthrow, above all the disillusionment or at least disorientation of those others. So realism, in its own terms, is not pop—it defies rather than flatters desire. But surely it *can* be pop, depending on how imaginable its triumphs are, and this is to some degree a function of how intelligibly the overthrow of the other/model/rival is represented *within* the realist work. When characters within the work are shown in such disarray, the unshocked readers triumph, are granted their desires. Fearful, anti-romantic aspects of reality which readers outside the work *are* shocked by, occlude, make entirely theoretical, such victories. Genuinely shocked readers endure their chastisement in the name of high art. They have been subjected, by the grimly accepting characters within the fiction, by the even more masterfully grim author. But habitually shocked readers—the concept does feel paradoxical!—one may suspect of enjoying an identity at the expense of the more timorous mainstream. By the same measure, we might say realism is high art not so much when anyone is shocked as when the reader and

author or implied author *share* the illusions or desires that are sacrificed, waking together on the cold hillside of indefinite deferral. This is presumably why Flaubert felt he had to say Madame Bovary was him. (Except, we must observe, in some moods, his or hers, she clearly *wasn't*.)

Other people are plural. “They” notoriously say, expect, erroneously believe things about singular me. Pop pleasures are communal, collective: Gans offers the example of a youthful crowd tapping toes or stomping feet to a single, overriding beat. Except, we imagine, the ironic postmodern individualist, whose foot may also be moving, in eloquent quasi-mimicry, but whose self-consciousness causes him to float aloof.

Once—call it the golden age of realism, or the Romantic era—once, the desires of others could merely be reversed, negated, to produce a privileged, indeed originary insight. The true, the mysterious, the deep, was the nothing to “their” sparagmatic something. High art deferred broadly imitated desires in order to model more satisfactory ones, achieve more prestigious differences, an individual apprehension of the human. Individuality itself.

But, if this operation was always tributary, from the Romantic period forward, to the collective desires it defied, the clear risk now is that it will merge entirely into its erstwhile rival, that its satisfactions will feed too smoothly and inevitably back into the collective joys and resentments it sought to transcend, leaving just another foot-stomper with only the faintly detectable whiff about him of bored self-contempt. Or is that middle age?

## **Essay 6 — On the High to Pop Transit**

Turning English teacher, in middle age, has landed the present author in a relationship of unexpected pathos with William Wordsworth’s “We Are Seven.” This is in no direct way the fault or doing, I think, of the poet, who died in 1850, nor of his still and always exquisite poem. Some historical imagination is needed, though, to grasp why the volume in which it first appeared in 1798 was largely greeted with hostility and incomprehension, and why the angry young poet of that day sarcastically anticipated such rejection in his famous preface: “Readers accustomed to the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers, if they persist in reading this book to its conclusion, will perhaps frequently have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness: they will look round for poetry, and will be induced to enquire by what species of courtesy these attempts can be permitted to assume that title.” Such struggle, I happily imagine as I assign this essay, is also the heart of education.

But my 21<sup>st</sup>-century undergraduates are of course otherwise accustomed, and for many of them “We Are Seven” is notably “simplistic” —a term they deploy in a mode of heartfelt gratitude. “Simplistic” in the good way. They are afloat, many of them, adrift we might better say, “alone on a wide, wide sea” of literary and scholarly phraseology whose character is not even determinant enough, for them, to be gaudy or inane. If Wordsworth and I intended disorientation we have achieved quite the opposite effect for many poor young souls, who find here an island of refuge and safety—a desert island, perhaps, but at least a dry one. Might I please write my term essay on “We Are Seven”? (*Not* “Tintern Abbey”?) Are there more poems like “We Are Seven”? I don’t like poetry, but ... well, maybe I could do something on “We Are Seven.” “I was thinking of a comparison between ‘We Are Seven’ and one of Beyoncé’s songs...” Those who don’t draw a complete blank when asked on their exam to mention one or two principles from the “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*” often suggest that Wordsworth believed in writing poetry in simple (or simplistic) language so people could understand it. They less frequently recall the poet’s denunciation of the “deluges of [the] idle and extravagant,” the “sickly and stupid” popular art which has nourished a “degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation” and reduced his contemporaries’ minds to “a state of almost savage torpor.” What once was high, some of it, for them, now is pop.

It is, of course, one of the more commonly accepted markers of popular art that it is “easy” while high is correspondingly “hard.” A torpid mind still presumptively the product of too much of the former. Generative Anthropology allows us to make the somewhat finer distinction about deferral and the functioning of society as a whole, but the challenge, the concern, the menace even, of dumbing-down, is now a familiar bromide of the postmodern market world.

Sometimes the high to pop transit, though, can take quite different forms. I attended, for example, in the nineties in Toronto, a staging of Shakespeare’s “King Lear” in which Lear was played by a woman. All the other parts were filled in their traditional genders, and the text was otherwise intact, as demanding and as tragic as ever it was. But the experience was unmistakably altered. The most unbearable of dramatizations of the convergence of violence and desire upon an uninhabitable public centre had been inflected to the resentful demonstration that in the grandeur of *their* central suffering, too, women have proven their detractors wrong. Admiration of the lady monarch, of the actress’s performance, was obligatory. The production was, correspondingly, a considerable critical and popular success.

Or, to return again to the Romantics in post-modernity, another of my hauntingly frank undergraduates, encountering Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” noted how, as the poet listened, a birdsong was “playing” in the woods. That is, playing, the way a Beyoncé song plays on an iPod. Unmediated avian nature, it seems, perhaps

passing in transit through Yeats' Byzantine handiwork bird, had arrived in the postmodern market, one more voice, or product, among the multitude on offer. But is this something the poem has always known? "Perhaps," Keats says, "the self-same song . . . found a path / Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home, / She stood in tears amid the alien corn." Who *knew* how alien, one might respond, but to the discomfited if not quite tearful students I have tried to strand in such a place, the means to look homeward, to popular comforts, however small, undermine—or ultimately overwhelm—all my schemes of disorientation.

Circumspect derivation: Maybe all high art contains the seeds of its own popularization.

## Essay 7 — Cautious Conclusions

The high art experience is not dead, or dying, even if some genres that once provoked it are. Desire in modernity, however, can also push past almost any technique of deferral, popularize or merely brush aside even the highest of the high.

In modernity, in the market world, the erstwhile peripheries proliferate. An immense number of aesthetic experiences occur simultaneously, more and more and more, every one different, vastly outnumbering the artworks that provoke them. Classifications must be exceedingly general, typologies ideal only.

Aesthetic experiences have histories, individual and collective, that individual artworks do not. Even the changing character of artworks and genres thereof is only the roughest gauge of these histories.

In order genuinely to contribute to our understanding, through Generative Anthropology, of the full range of such phenomena, the high to pop or pop to high transit must be mapped diachronically along its synchronic continuum, across whose vectors we must acknowledge the gusting and eddying of ever-changing ethical moods. But if doing so helped us recover some of the particularity of what remain profoundly variable experiences of deferral, it would be worth the effort, even constituting a new opening for literary and cultural criticism.

## Notes

1. "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" (1939), line 36. ([back](#))
2. <http://philanthropynewsdigest.org/news/detroit-not-negotiating-on-loan-proposal-with-art-as-collateral> ([back](#))

3.  
<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/j/jala/2629860.0030.104/-lincoln-stowe-and-the-little-woman-great-war-story-the-making?rgn=main;view=fulltext>. This has not prevented its broad circulation, and even, indeed, the erection of a statue, in Hartford. ([back](#))
4. <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw315.htm> ([back](#))
5. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MlfGRVRqj4M> ([back](#))
6. "The realist's claim of empiricism is meant to fend off the danger of romantic subjectivism, where the artistic self discovers itself rather than the world." *Originary Thinking*, 176. ([back](#))